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SUBJECT: MGLE01: MICHEL AOUN -- STILL NOT READY TO TAKE
THE MORAL HIGH GROUND

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a meeting with Ambassador and PolChief, Michel Aoun fended off attempts to nudge him back into the mainstream of Lebanon's political life. We told Aoun that the Lebanese may be ready to accept a leader with strong moral authority who is neither March 14/Hariri, nor March 8/Hizballah-Syria. The Ambassador told Aoun that his reputation and his record of resistance to Syria can serve him as a means to attract support from Lebanese dissatisfied with the present government, but frightened of the pro-Syrian politicians with whom Aoun has surrounded himself. Aoun, steadfast in his defense of his Hizballah pact, blamed the Siniora government and its campaign against him for his radical, anti-Hariri stances. The Ambassador suggested to Aoun that it would be a good outcome if Hassan Nasrallah left the June 8 dialogue session feeling isolated in the face of real unity between March 14 and Aoun. The meeting with Aoun took place just five days after Shia crowds rioted in Beirut protesting a television lampooning of Nasrallah, and a week after Hizballah and Israel exchanged fire along the Blue Line. End summary.

AOUN AND HIZBALLAH--A JUSTIFIED ASSOCIATION

2. (C) The Ambassador and PolChief traveled to Aoun's home to discuss the June 8 resumption of the National Dialogue and to get a sense of how Aoun saw his agreement with Hizballah in light of recent Hizballah-inspired violence across the Blue Line and in Beirut. Aoun was prepared to defend his agreement with Hizballah, but not the violence that erupted on June 1 in Beirut. He said that Lebanese are highly politicized, and react emotionally to political topics. He personally did not accept the idea that political criticism should lead to violence. Aoun smiled and said he has frequently been the subject of lampooning, and even mean-spirited attacks. He turned to his son-in-law cum advisor, Gebran Basile, and said Basile had been subjected to libelous personal attacks. Of his own press image, Aoun smiled and said, "They say I am crazy; I should be institutionalized, and I throw ashtrays at my deputies. But this is politics." The Ambassador asked Aoun about his own much-publicized comments about "burning Future (Hariri) TV." Laughing, Aoun said, "they deserve it!" But Aoun said that he had made that comment to show how reasonable he is: while Future TV should be burned for what was said about Aoun, Aoun did not unleash his supporters to do so.

3. (C) The Shia had a different, more volatile political culture that did not allow for a sense of humor to touch religious figures. Hizballah acted to contain a spontaneous

show of force, preventing damage rather than causing any. However, Nasrallah had agreed to put the matter behind him, saying the television producer was blameless. The Shia also agreed to pay reparations for any damages done. According to Aoun, it is the Siniora government that is blowing the June 1 events out of proportion. The government is creating an atmosphere of tension that lends itself to confrontation and distrust.

AOUN AND THE PRO-SYRIANS
--THE COMPANY HE KEEPS

¶4. (C) The Ambassador asked Aoun how a man of his reputation could countenance having political allies like Hizballah, Omar Karame, Suleiman Franjieh and other pro-Syrian figures. Aoun said he did not agree with all the things done by his allies. He objected that the pro-Syrian label is often unjustly placed on those who are simply anti-Hariri. Aoun cited scores of occasions when the Hariri-controlled press stamped him pro-Syrian as a form of character assassination. But, he countered, he is transparent in his dealings with Hizballah and others. Anyone can see what he is doing and ask him why he is doing it. But the government and the parliamentary majority carry out their activities behind a veil. Discussions between Nasrallah and Hariri were not made public as were his own discussions with Nasrallah. Aoun claimed that his transparency has allowed him to bring Nasrallah closer to the people, and has alleviated the fears of many Christians.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador encouraged Aoun to look to the political center for his support base. He explained that the choices for the Lebanese have become so polarized that an

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important group finds itself unable to move toward Hariri or Aoun. Aoun, without his questionable allies, has a natural connection with many centrists inside and outside of March 14. These people would make useful allies.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador asked Aoun if any members of March 14, especially Jumblatt, had approached him to cooperate. Aoun replied that Jumblatt's associate, and Minister for Information, Ghazi Aridi had called Aoun asking for a face-to-face meeting. The Ambassador explained that the USG foresees continued political inertia while Emile Lahoud completes the remaining 18 months of his extended mandate. In order to facilitate change, Aoun could serve as a natural ally for forces stuck between the ineffective government and the intimidating pro-Syrian alliance. These forces might not oppose an Aounist presence in a new, reorganized cabinet. Aoun said he took part in the negotiations that formed the Siniora government and yet he was rewarded with nothing. The Hariri majority brought Hizballah and Amal into the cabinet, and still he is accused of being pro-Syrian.

AOUN AND THE DIALOGUE:
PRINCIPLE NOT DETAILS

¶7. (C) Aoun said that he will not be addressing what he called technical details during the upcoming session of the national dialogue. Instead, he will look for statements of principle covering the use of Hizballah's weapons exclusively for national defense. He will press to have action on the issue of Palestinian arms outside of the refugee camps. Aoun said that the broad public consensus on Palestinian arms should push the government to act. But there has still been no action.

¶8. (C) The Ambassador suggested it might be useful for Aoun and March 14 to wrest from Nasrallah an agreement that Hizballah's weapons were not to be used in regional conflicts against Israel or to aid Iran. Nasrallah has made public statements to this effect, but a written agreement would be

useful to state clearly that Hizballah is Lebanese, and not an Iranian agent. the Ambassador warned Aoun that the USG believes Nasrallah will block any attempt to address the Palestinian issue. He suggested that Aoun and the forces of March 14 might use this consensus issue to unite, and with that, scotch Nasrallah's efforts to obstruct progress. Unity between March 14 and Aoun would leave Nasrallah feeling justifiably isolated, and more willing to negotiate. Aoun replied with a mute, impassive nod.

COMMENT--AOUN FIRM, PARTY DEPUTIES
WILLING TO TRY RECONCILIATION

¶9. (C) Aoun is still too angry with his exclusion from the cabinet last year to seek opportunities to come together with March 14. As the Ambassador and Poloff left Aoun's residence, the motorcade of Suleiman Franjeh pulled up on what we believe is a rare visit to Beirut. Franjeh plans to announce soon the creation of his own political party dedicated to close relations with Syria and an end to the Siniora government.

¶10. (C) Immediately following the June 6 meeting with Aoun, the Ambassador and poloff met with Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) deputies Farid el-Khazen and Ghassan Moukhaiber, both of whom are used by Aoun as intermediaries with Lebanon's various political factions. The Ambassador made a presentation similar to the one addressed to Aoun, namely, that the FPM should reposition itself as an alternative to the March 14 bloc and the Amal/Hizballah alliance but one based on principles shared with March 14 ideals. But both el-Khazen and Moukhaiber insisted that Hariri and Siniora continued to reject any overtures from the FPM. MP Moukhaiber admitted that certain avenues of communication (and possible cooperation) had been gradually developing -- specifically, between Aoun and Walid Jumblatt -- but more contacts were necessary to rebuild trust.

¶11. (C) Addressing the upcoming national dialogue, el-Khazen indicated that Aoun did not plan to engage the national dialogue on defense issues until he could evaluate the March 14 position. The Ambassador remarked that such passivity would likely be interpreted as quiet support for Hizballah's position, but el-Khazen argued that would be an incorrect interpretation. The meeting ended with both el-Khazen and Moukhaiber indicating they would be discussing

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all of these issues with Aoun.

FELTMAN